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Canada

Speech for the
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada,
Vic Toews, Q.C.

University of Western Ontario Law School
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Thank you, [MC], for your kind introduction.

I. Introduction

I wish to thank Dr. Holloway [Dean of Law School] for giving me the opportunity to speak with you. I very much welcome this opportunity to set out our vision of a safer, healthier Canadian society, and to share our thoughts on the best strategies for making that vision a reality.

Last week, the Governor General read the Speech from the Throne. In it, Canada's new government laid out its agenda for change. The Speech was about turning over a new leaf for ordinary, hard-working Canadians.

To be a bit more specific, Canada's new government will be turning over five new leaves, in the form of our five priorities. They are: passing the *Federal Accountability Act*, cutting the GST, making our communities safer by cracking down on gun, gang and drug crime, giving parents a choice in child care, and establishing a Patient Wait Times Guarantee.

I was honoured when the new Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, asked me to serve as Minister of Justice and Attorney General in our new government. In my new role, I will be working closely with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, to deliver on the new government's priority of making our streets and communities safer by tackling crime.

Today I'd like to discuss some of our new government's priorities for strengthening our justice system. I am confident that the actions we take to achieve these priorities will result in reforms that will mean everyone—particularly the most vulnerable members of society—can feel safe and secure in their communities.

Canadians have told us they want us to crack down on violent crime. They are fed up with watching their local evening news provide a steady stream of gun violence and criminality.

I know that police and prosecutors are growing frustrated too. Recently the Prime Minister and I both spoke with representatives of frontline police in Ottawa. As the first line of defence against guns, gangs and drugs, I heard their concerns loudly and clearly—that our laws seem more focused on the rights of criminals than the rights of law abiding citizens. But I have met with this group frequently in the past as well, in my previous role as Opposition Justice Critic, and in my various provincial roles. So I was struck by how their concerns today are the same concerns they have been bringing up for years.

When it comes to crime, it is the new government's firm commitment to finally respond to the

concerns of police, prosecutors, and most importantly, ordinary Canadians. We will propose changes to the *Criminal Code* that will mean serious time for serious crimes.

There is no task more important to any government than the protection of its citizens. We acknowledge that this is a difficult undertaking, but it can be done, and it will be done. I would like to briefly highlight some of the areas that we must address to make this vision a reality.

II. Getting Tough on Gun Crime

Safe streets and low crime rates have long been cherished as a cornerstone of our quality of life here in Canada. Our priority of cracking down on crime is rooted in Canadian values. It is a priority for our new government, because it is a priority for every Canadian. People rely on safe communities as they go about their daily business, no matter where they live. In fact, it concerns me that in too many Canadian communities, safe streets are no longer simply a given. Instead, citizens are more anxious, more fearful that criminals could harm them or their families, perhaps for no reason at all.

Canadians want real solutions to these challenges. If we are going to succeed in making our streets and communities safer, we must first address the growing problem of gun crime—particularly in our cities. But rural areas are not immune to the problem either. The discovery of eight bodies not far from here this past weekend has underscored the fact that violent crime is not isolated to Canada's big cities. Violent crime can and does affect us all.

I believe the issue of gun crime has now become a priority concern of Canadians, and the time has come for us to toughen our approach to combating this growing danger. Violent offenders and other serious offenders deserve more than a slap on the wrist.

Fundamentally, I believe that serious offences should be met with serious consequences. Our new government is developing ways to strengthen sentences for those who commit gun crimes. As the Mayerthorpe tragedy illustrated all too well, violent criminals should not be free to circulate within our society. We must learn from these terrible incidents and—with strengthened resolve—ensure that they never happen again.

We will examine a number of law reforms as part of our commitment to get tough on gun crime and other serious crime. These include:

- Introducing mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain drug trafficking offences, weapons offences, crimes committed while on parole, and by repeat offenders, to ensure that serious crime results in real punishment;

- Adopting, in collaboration with the provinces, a national strategy to fight organized crime, including the creation of a joint national task force on security; and

- Working with the provinces on effective gun control programs designed to keep guns out of the hands of criminals, while respecting the rights of law-abiding Canadians to own and use firearms responsibly.

Getting tough on gun crime and other violent crime serves as both a means and a message: it proclaims that we believe in a peaceful society—a society that does not tolerate acts of violence. It also serves to protect us from those violent offenders who might otherwise be sent back to the community to commit another act of violence. Many provinces and community groups have endorsed this kind of approach. The Government of Canada is committed to advancing these types of criminal justice reforms as we move to improve public safety.

III. Law Enforcement and Public Safety

In addition to pursuing law reform initiatives, our new government will ensure that we have enough police officers to effectively enforce our laws.

According to Department of Public Safety documents, there is currently a shortage of some 1,000 RCMP officers in federal, provincial, and municipal policing roles. In addition, many provincial and municipal police forces are under-funded and overstretched.

To correct this situation, our new government intends to take some strong measures. We will re-invest money wasted on the long-gun registry into hiring more front-line enforcement personnel. And we will establish a new cost-shared program jointly with provincial and municipal governments, to put more police on the beat in our cities and communities.

I believe that having more police on our streets makes our streets safer, and I have always endorsed this approach to community safety. As Justice Minister, I will continue to advocate on behalf of our police forces with my Cabinet colleagues and in Parliament.

IV. National Drug Strategy

Another area of focus will be a new National Drug Strategy. The last thing Canada needs is more illegal drugs on our streets. The number of marijuana grow-operations has increased dramatically, as has the production and distribution of drugs such as crack cocaine, crystal meth, and ecstasy.

I understand that there are no easy solutions: this is a complex problem that will require complex solutions. We need to consider a multi-faceted approach that will include changes to prison sentences and fines, as well as programs to help young people stay drug-free. Specifically, our strategy will involve a few key components.

We will end house arrest and ensure mandatory minimum prison sentences and large monetary fines for serious drug offenders. We will deal harshly with marijuana grow operators and producers and dealers of crystal meth and crack.

We will prevent the decriminalization of marijuana. Our new government has no intention of re-introducing the previous government's legislation on this issue.

And, we will introduce a strategy with particular emphasis on youth. This strategy will encompass all drugs, not just marijuana, and will involve a nationwide awareness campaign to keep young people from using drugs.

This National Drug Strategy will demand that we work closely with other departments and stakeholders. I look forward to working with my colleagues in Cabinet together with the provinces and territories, community organizations, and our police forces. Together, I am confident that we can reduce drug use in our country, and create a healthier future for our young people.

V. Stronger Correctional Services

In addition to these law reform and law enforcement initiatives, we must also ensure that we have effective correctional services.

Our new government will re-examine the programs we now have in place for inmates, and find the best ways to integrate them back into the community so that we reduce the risk of violent re-offending.

But at the same time, we will get tough when it comes to incarcerating violent offenders. We must put an end to what has been referred to as "Club Fed." All too often, we see violent offenders moved to minimum security facilities before serving a significant portion of their sentence. Clearly,

there is a problem in the system, and we must look for ways to resolve it.

During the election, our new government committed itself to ending the availability of conditional sentences—more commonly known as "house arrest"—for serious crimes. I believe this is an important step toward strengthening our correctional services, and it is a commitment that we intend to fulfill.

This will mean ending conditional sentences for serious crimes, including certain violent and sexual offences, weapons offences, major drug offences, crimes committed against children, and impaired driving causing death or serious injury;

It will mean repealing section 745.6 of the *Criminal Code*—the so-called "Faint Hope Clause"—that allows a criminal serving a life sentence to apply for early parole.

And it will mean replacing statutory release with earned parole.

I know that my colleague, Minister Day, has also taken these issues to heart and will be working hard in Parliament to bring about positive reforms.

VI. Investing in Crime Prevention

The final component of community safety that I wish to discuss with you is crime prevention. Our government, as I have discussed, is focused on tackling the pressing issues of gun crime, criminal gangs, and drugs. We will ensure that serious crime means serious time.

But this Government also recognizes that it is equally important to prevent criminal behaviour before it has a chance to take root. We will address the root causes of crime by supporting communities and families with effective social programs and sound economic policies. We will help young people to stand firmly against the factors that place them at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Specifically, we will:

- Work with the provinces, municipalities, police, and community leaders in areas threatened by gun and gang violence to support programs which reach out to young people. We must help them recognize the dangers of violence in their schools and community, so that they reject gang and gun violence;

- We will support results-oriented, community-based initiatives for addictions treatment, training, and rehabilitation of those in trouble with the law; and

- We will invest in community-based, educational, sporting, cultural, and vocational opportunities for young people at risk.

By working with the provinces, territories, and other partners, this Government will support solutions that will help end the cycle of violence that can lead to broken communities and broken lives.

VII. Conclusion

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank you once again for inviting me to speak to you today. In the months ahead, Minister Day and I look forward to fulfilling our government's priority of strengthening the justice system and creating the safer, more just Canada we all aspire to build.

Canadians have told us what they want from government and what their priorities are. Our new government has listened, and will act. My Conservative colleagues and I will be working hard with all members of parliament to deliver on all of our commitments. By finding areas of common

concern and working together with other parties, we have already achieved results.

Specifically, I was pleased to play a part in the Ad Hoc Committee of Parliamentarians to review a nominee for the Supreme Court of Canada. Our new government was able to bring an unprecedented degree of openness and accountability to the process of appointing people to the highest court in the land. It was my great honour to chair the public hearing in February with the nominee, Mr. Justice Rothstein, and to speak at his welcome ceremony to the Court on Monday. His wisdom, experience and warmth will be a welcome addition.

I also wish to extend an invitation to you, as students and professors of law, to share your thoughts about Canada's system of justice with your Members of Parliament and with the Department of Justice. Your opinions matter and we appreciate your input.

I also hope that, upon graduation, some of you will consider a career with the federal Department of Justice. The Department deals with every aspect of the law and our work touches the lives of all Canadians. I invite you to give some thought to a career of public service as you enter the workforce. It is the career path that I chose many years ago, and I have found it to be greatly fulfilling.

Thank you and best of luck with your studies.

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